



HORTI SELBYANI

HANS WIEHLER: A TRIBUTE

LEE DESMON

Research Volunteer, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, 811 South Palm Avenue,
Sarasota, FL 34236-7726, USA.

Hans Wiehler is remembered as a leading gesneriad explorer and taxonomist (FIGURE 1). Not so well known is that he and his family were part of a flood of World War II refugees fleeing from the advancing Russian Army in East Prussia. Hans, then 14 years old, kept a diary covering January to March 1945 and documenting the traumatic experience that would shape his life.

Hans Joachim Wiehler was born on July 8, 1930, in the village of Klettendorf in East Prussia, about 60 miles south of the Baltic Sea. He was the eldest of three boys, in a family that led a happy and privileged life.

His parents, Alfred and Hedwig, owned a very large farm where Alfred bred fine horses and other livestock with the help of 14 workers (FIGURE 2). Alfred Wiehler was mayor of the village and well respected by his neighbors.

The Wiehlers were descendants of a Mennonite clan, which moved from Switzerland in the 1640s as religious refugees, and eventually migrated north to settle in Prussia in the delta area of the Vistula River. Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and his aggrandizement began in 1935, when the German army occupied the Rhineland, annexed Austria, and dismantled Czechoslovakia. The Soviet Union, fearing the advance of the Axis (which included Italy), signed a nonaggression pact with Germany in September 1939.

Hans' father Albert was drafted but allowed to stay on the farm for the time being, because the German army needed horses and farm products. Hans attended elementary school in Klet-

tendorf from 1937 to 1942 and was a student at the Winrich-von-Knipprode Gymnasium in Marienburg from 1942 until January 1945. His favorite sport was skiing in the Austrian Alps.

On June 22, 1941, Hitler disregarded the non-aggression treaty, and the German army invaded the Soviet Union. In 5 months' time, the Germans were within 30 miles of Moscow, but the bitter cold winter weather and fierce Russian resistance stopped them.

After decimating the German army (160,000 killed and 100,000 surrendered), the USSR launched a counteroffensive against Germany, and during the winter of 1944, it came within "hearing distance" of Klettendorf. Alfred Wiehler had gone off to war, never to return. Almost overnight the Wiehlers (and their neighbors) became refugees. They packed what they could into three horse-drawn wagons and on January 24, 1945, began a 2-month flight west to escape the advancing Russians. Ten of the farm workers decided to stay, and they moved into the big house; Hedwig persuaded four of the workers including Kruger, the farm foreman, to come along to drive the horses.

Hans and his mother rode in a wagon with nine others; the second wagon carried eight people. Carpets and settee covers were nailed to the sides and tops of the wagons for cover. Three horses pulled each of the passenger wagons, and four pulled the supply wagon. Carts, horses, and people fleeing on foot blocked the main road, delaying entry by the Wiehler caravan. German soldiers also were fleeing west, the road was sol-



FIGURE 1. Hans Joachim Wiehler, renowned gesneriad explorer and taxonomist, 1930–2003.

id ice, and the sound of the artillery was getting louder.

On January 27, Alfred's favorite riding horse, not suited to draying, could go no further, and Kruger had to shoot it. The temperature that night was -25°C . The caravan stopped at night to take shelter wherever it could be found. On January 28, they met elderly neighbors who had to spend the night sitting up in their cart, because they could not find a place to lie down and sleep. When it happened again the next night, they shot themselves. Kruger's Grand-

mother died on January 30 in Hans' wagon. She was buried in a ditch at the side of the road.

On February 8, Tante Käthe, Hedwig's sister, left the caravan with Hans' brothers Reinhard, age 9, and Frank, age 3, hoping to find safety for the youngsters. She managed to get them a ride in a truck headed for western Germany. Both Hans and Hedwig had high fevers and diarrhea but stayed with the caravan.

On March 8, a month later, SS troopers offered Hedwig and Hans a ride west in their ambulance, and Hedwig, anxious to find the boys, accepted. Kruger became the leader of the caravan. At 1 am, Hedwig and Hans were dropped off by the side of the road, baggage and all. They dragged all their worldly possessions, two suitcases, two rucksacks, and a duffle bag, to the town's business office, which was so packed with refugees that they could not get beyond the doorway. They spent the night on the floor.

In the morning, they found a refugee-packed truck headed for Gotenhafen (Gdansk) on the shore of the Baltic Sea. Hedwig had brought cigarettes, which probably were used to induce the driver to take them along.

On Wednesday, March 14, they stowed away on a T3 torpedo boat hoping to reach North Germany or Denmark. As the boat slowly left the harbor in a convoy, the Captain ordered the pas-

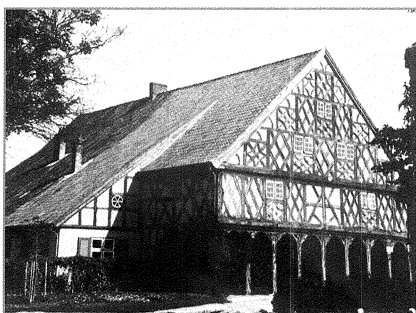


FIGURE 2. The Wiehler Family Farmhouse in Kletendorf, East Prussia (now Poland), from which Hans and his family in 1945 fled as refugees to escape the advancing Russian Army.

sengers to go below. All baggage had to remain on deck. After 2 hours at sea and while waiting for food from the galley, they heard a tremendous explosion, and the boat soon began to list. Hedwig grabbed a life preserver, tied it around Hans, and they elbowed their way on deck. The boat had been torpedoed by a Russian submarine, and the entire front of it was gone, along with their baggage. Their worldly possessions now consisted of the clothes on their backs and Hedwig's handbag.

They were in the midst of screaming people, many bloody, and some with clothes on fire. Motorboats from ships in the convoy approached to rescue survivors. Hedwig and Hans jumped into the water and were pulled aboard one of the rescue boats along with many others, some of whom were badly injured. The pilot said that they were going back to Gotenhafen after they picked up more survivors. They arrived after midnight; the town was without lights. They took refuge in the windowless barracks on the dock, which shook every time the nearby moored cruiser, *Leipzig*, fired a salvo at the Russians. On March 18, they managed to get aboard a converted minesweeper headed west; Hedwig begged half a loaf of bread from another refugee; she and Hans shared it, but were so distraught that neither of them could keep it down.

On March 21, the boat docked in Swinemunde. Most of the town had been flattened by RAF bombing raids, but they found a tavern that had food. Fortunately, Hedwig had their ration books in her handbag, and they were able to get something to eat.

In April 1945, Hedwig and Hans were able to reunite with Tante Käthe, Reinhard, and Frank. With the war still raging, the family continued west through Hamburg to Gluckstadt on the banks of the Elbe River, where they became stranded in a refugee camp. They lived a hand-to-mouth existence. The foregoing account of this 2-month travail is a condensation of the translated 26-page diary that Hans kept on cards and scraps of paper, which became a family treasure.

On May 8, 1945, Germany signed unconditional surrender documents; the war was over! The family moved to Oldendorf in September 1945, and in the spring of 1946, Hans continued his education at the Scharnhorst Gymnasium. The school was 30 km away in Hildesheim, which meant he had to get up at 5 am, walk for 30 minutes to the railway station, ride for 45 minutes, climb over a destroyed railroad bridge in the dark, and ride another train, getting to school at 8 am. He made the trip in reverse after school. Hedwig insisted that all three boys con-

tinue their education, and in that village of 2000 inhabitants, they were the only ones who attended school. It was there that Hans learned English.

When Hedwig became ill and could not work, the boys tried to earn money. Hans would jump on a moving train and throw coal to the ground, which his brothers collected to sell. They grew vegetables in a nearby garden; and when harvest time came, Hans would sleep there to prevent other refugees from stealing their produce.

In 1946, American Mennonites sent care packages containing corned beef, chocolate, coffee, and shoes, which helped the refugees survive. Coffee was scarce in Germany, so Hans and his brothers sold the care-package coffee on the black market for cash.

In 1946, Hans was baptized in the Mennonite Community in Goettingen, and became a youth leader. In 1950, he received his Abitur (baccalaureate or high school) diploma from the Scharnhorst Oberschule in Hildesheim, West Germany.

At this time, two options were available to him. He could begin an apprenticeship on an experimental farm run by the Max Plank Institute, which was working on seed breeding; this would offer him the opportunity to attend the University of Goettingen to study botany. The second option was to accept a 1-year exchange-student scholarship to study theology at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He became an exchange student in Harrisonburg, where he remained for one semester, then transferred to Goshen College, in Goshen, Indiana. It is probable that he chose to study in America because no scholarship was available at Goettingen, and also to escape the economic misery in post-war Germany. Thus, young Hans came to the United States.

While at Goshen, he visited the Bruderhof (brother's house) communities in New York State and was attracted to their communal lifestyle, their pacifism, and their approach to a society based on brotherly love.

In 1951, after a year in Goshen, Hans returned to Oldendorf and worked as a full-time "Jugendpastor" at the Mennonite church in Hamburg. Returning to the United States in 1953, he spent his junior year once again at Eastern Mennonite College and again transferred to Goshen College (FIGURE 3), where in 1954 he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Bible. In 1956, he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the Goshen Biblical Seminary.

Hans then joined the Bruderhof community in Rifton, New York, where he met Anne Gale, whom he married on October 12, 1958. Next they moved to a Bruderhof in New Meadow

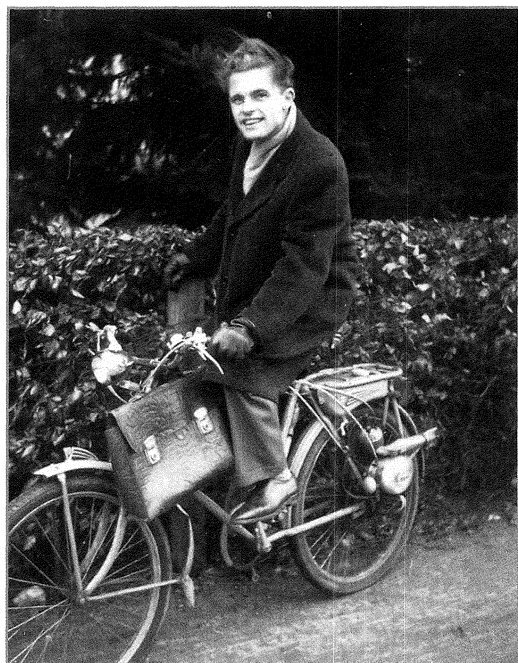


FIGURE 3. By 1953, Hans Wiehler was in the United States, biking to classes as a theology student at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.

Run, Pennsylvania, where they entered into a one-for-all, all-for-one community life. Hans and Anne had five children: Dirk, born in 1959, who died before his first birthday; Johanna, born in 1960; Simeon, born in 1962; Maria, born in 1964; and Daniel, born in 1966. At the Pennsylvania commune, Hans taught courses in social studies, German, biology, and art at the elementary and junior high school levels.

In 1965, Hans left the Meadow Run Bruderhof community to begin life anew. Anne and the children remained at the Bruderhof; Danny was born a month later.

Hans' youngest brother, Frank, suggests that losing a father, a home, economic stability, and becoming a refugee at age 14 may have caused Hans to seek such a strong center of orientation and self confidence that, thereafter, he always needed to be an individual.

Hans found employment at a nearby greenhouse and eventually applied for a scholarship in the Botany Department at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

In September of 1966, he was granted a full scholarship at Cornell and became a Research Assistant at the Cornell Plantations and a Teaching Assistant at the L.H. Bailey Herbarium. While there, he began research on the gesneriad plant family, which became his life's passion.

He earned his Master's degree in botany while at Cornell. His thesis was entitled "Studies in the Morphology of Leaf Epidermis, in Vascularity of Node and Petiole, and in Intergeneric Hybridization in the Gesneriaceae—Gesnerioideae."

Hans then began work on a Ph.D. in botany at the University of Miami, where he studied under Calaway Dodson, a well-respected orchid scientist.

In the spring of 1973, Dr. Dodson became the executive director of the new Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida, and persuaded Hans to join his staff. Two moving vans were required to bring all the living gesneriad plants and preserved specimens that Hans had collected while at Cornell.

In May 1979, Hans received a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Miami. His dissertation was entitled, "Generic Delimitation in a New Classification of the Neotropical Gesneriaceae." In it, he concluded, "Previous classifications of the American Gesneriaceae were long outdated," and noted, "This revision contains a new subfamily, a new tribe, and several new genera, as well as new tribal and generic re-alignments." Wiehler was on staff at Selby Gardens in the 1970s and early 1980s. As a founding scientist at Selby Gardens, he served as associate editor and business manager of *Selbyana* 1975–1981 and contributed 19 articles to the journal, many on new gesneriad species. An article based on his dissertation was published in *Selbyana* 6(1–4).

In 1982, Wiehler left Selby Gardens to establish the Gesneriad Research Foundation in Sarasota. The Foundation's herbarium (GES) grew to include plant collections made by Wiehler and his associates during two decades of field research on neotropical gesneriads. In the spring of 2002, a year before his death, Hans Wiehler donated the Gesneriad Research Foundation's plant collection to Selby Gardens, finding it the best repository for his life's work. His donation consisted of nearly 2000 field collections, collections from cultivated plants, specimens preserved in liquid, and more than 30 type collections for names of Gesneriaceae species published by Wiehler from 1972 to 1995. Selby Gardens currently is organizing a Gesneriad Resource Center to promote the study of the Gesneriaceae family.

Botanists from around the world continue to recognize the contributions that Hans Joachim Wiehler has made to the science of taxonomy. His wartime diary, written at age 14, allows us a privileged glimpse of his formative years and of the plight of refugees worldwide.

To read the Hans Wiehler Diary, covering

January to March 1945, along with a timeline of his life, visit www.selby.org at Research under Gesneriad Activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is indebted to the following persons for their contributions: Bruce Host, Director of Plant Collections and Scientific Publications, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, and Barry Walsh, Managing Editor of *Selbyana* and MSBG Press for suggesting that I write this article and

their assistance in crafting it; Jeanne Katzenstein, Editor of *The Gloxianian*, for publishing an abbreviated version; Simeon and Danny Wiehler, Hans' sons, for furnishing information and encouragement; Frank Wiehler, Hans' youngest brother, for providing the translation of Hans' diary and supplementary data; Anne Wiehler, Hans' wife, and Maria, their daughter, for translating and transcribing Hans' diary from German script into English; Elaine Engst, Director and University Archivist, Cornell University, for archival material; and Larry Skog for biographical information on Wiehler.

EPILOGUE: THE HANS WIEHLER STORY

FRANK WIEHLER
Senningerberg, Luxembourg

The Wiehler family came from Switzerland as religious refugees (Anabaptists/Mennonites) to Holland around 1640. In the next century, many Mennonites from Holland migrated to the delta of the river Vistula in Prussia, now belonging to Poland, bordering the Baltic Sea. For several centuries up to 1945, the area around Elbing (Polish: Elbląg) had been the historical center of the family. Before the Second World War, Alfred and Hedwig Wiehler owned a very large farm in the village of Klettendorf. Living in a Mennonite environment, the family was well off, had many hired workers, the father raised fine horses, and acted as mayor of the village. One small son, Dirk, died in those years, from a ruptured appendix.

In September 1939, Adolf Hitler, the German dictator, started an imperialistic war against Poland, France, Russia, and other European countries. So began World War II. By November 1944, it was clear that Germany was losing the war, but still Alfred Wiehler, born in 1900, was drafted into the army. The family never saw him again. Not until 1955 did they learn that he had died in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp in Hungary in February 1945.

Toward the end of the war, Russian troops invaded Germany. The misery the German army brought upon the people of the neighboring countries now hit back on Germans, mainly civilians, guilty or innocent—guilty because they had supported the Nazi regime or innocent, because they had not. The civilian population tried to escape from the fighting. Hans' diary tells of the flight of his mother Hedwig Wiehler, born 1907, with her three children, Hans, 14; Reinhard, 9; and Frank, 3 years old, in early 1945. We were accompanied by Tante Käthe, Mother's older sister, numerous neighbors from the village of Klettendorf, and four Ukrainian laborers, who also wanted to escape the Red Army.

Millions of other families endured such circumstances, and many lives were lost. After the war, the German Province of Prussia was taken as a war trophy by Russia and Poland; ethnic cleansing was applied to all Germans still living there regardless of their political or religious convictions. Among the 12 million people who lost their homes were the Wiehlers. The

diary, kept by Hans on cards and scraps of paper during their flight, became a family treasure.

It told of the ship that took Hans and Hedwig into the northern Baltic sea, along the Swedish coast, to avoid torpedoes from Russian submarines, then back to the northern coast of Pomerania, Germany, to Swinemünde (now a town in western Poland). In April 1945, they were able to reunite with Tante Käthe, Reinhard, and me. We had managed to travel by train to Mirow, north of Berlin. The trains we took were hit by aircraft on several occasions, but we were lucky to escape. When we met each other in Mirow, Hedwig and Hans were difficult to recognize after their 4 months "on the road," having nothing with them but the clothing they were wearing. I hardly knew my mother and brother, they were so skinny.

But the war was still going on, and the Russian front was coming closer again. The family continued to go west, via Wittenberge and Hamburg to Glückstadt, a small town on the banks of the river Elbe, where we were stranded in a refugee camp.

In May 1945, the war finally was over! British tanks entered the town. "They treated us fair and decent," Hedwig noted in her report. Relief! No more shooting, no more killing. But where are the other members of the family, father, grandmother, uncles, aunts, cousins? Where to find a more decent place to live?

In September 1945, the family moved to Oldendorf, a small village 40 km south of Hanover. I still remember that trip, sitting on a wagon, four horses in front of me, crossing the city of Hamburg, totally in ruins from heavy bombardments by British aircraft 12 months before. It was like 9/11 but 1000 times worse, as the whole city of 2 million inhabitants was flattened. Nobody lived there anymore but dogs and cats. We passed a ghost town.

In spring 1946, we went to school again, for the first time since January 1945. Hans liked it, Reinhard did not. The grammar school (Scharnhorst Gymnasium) was 30 km away, in the city of Hildesheim. This meant getting up at 5 in the morning, walking 30 minutes to the railway station, taking the train, changing the train after 45 minutes, climbing in the dark over a destroyed railway bridge, taking the next train on the other side

of the river, arriving at school by 8 am, and making the same trip back at the end of the day!

Our mother was ill and therefore could not work to earn some money. Living in a small village as refugees, as second-class people, without a father and without any income, this was hard. We organized our life by "organizing" things like coal stolen from running trains passing by or firewood stolen in the forests. I still remember my brother Hans, sitting on a running train at night, throwing coal to the ground and me running behind the train with a bucket and a torch in my hands, collecting coal. Did we feel bad? Not at all! Those who know how hunger and cold may affect you will understand and forgive. Vegetables and potatoes were grown in a nearby garden we rented. When harvest time came, Hans slept in the ditch next to the garden to protect the cropping results from getting stolen at night.

In late 1946, North American Mennonites sent us "care parcels" with corned beef, chocolate, shoes . . . and coffee. That helped us to survive. The coffee was sold on the black market in order to get hold of some cash.

Our mother's philosophy during this period was very important to us, although we then might not have fully understood her. As we lost everything during the war, her message was: Forget about our misery; the more important thing I can give you these days is a good education.

And that is what she did. She was keen on it and looked after us, making sure that we passed our baccalaureate in a social environment of a village of 2000 inhabitants, where nobody else but the three Wiehler boys went to a very distant grammar school. As a consequence, she was considered by her autochthon neighbors as being ignorant and arrogant. In fact, it would have been easier for all of us to survive by working as unskilled labor on a farm in the village. In that case, we never would have left that place in our lifespan.

In 1948 Hans was baptized in the Mennonite Community in Göttingen by Dr. Ernst Crous. In 1950 he passed his baccalaureate in Hildesheim. What next? That was the question. In his mind, he had two options: To start an apprenticeship on a nearby experimental farm run by the Max Planck Institute, famous, among other things, for its research in agriculture (especially seed breeding) with a later option to study agriculture or botany at the University of Göttingen, Germany; or to study theology at the Mennonite College in Goshen, Indiana. He decided to choose the latter, and 15 years later came back to the first.

During the late 1940s, the Mennonite youth, all refugees from Prussia and survivors of the great escape, got on its feet again, and Hans was part of it. He was heavily involved in organizing youth camps together with "Pax Boys," delegated by the Mennonite Churches of North America to revitalize Mennonite identity in West Germany.

Why did Hans decide to study theology? As his younger brother, I don't know exactly, but I assume the following: In 1950 he received a scholarship at Goshen College; there was no scholarship available for him at that time at Göttingen University. To escape from the economic misery in Germany and to see the world might have been other reasons, and, certainly,

being a Christian believer might have been even more decisive.

In 1951, after 12 months, Hans came back to Oldendorf, as the exchange scholarship was limited to that period; worked again with the Mennonite youth of Northern Germany, based at the Mennonite Church in Hamburg, now as full-time "Jugendpastor"; and went back to Goshen, I think, in late 1952. He obtained his masters degree in theology around 1955–1956, if my memory is right.

On 12 October 1958, he married Anne Gale, who was born on July 22, 1931, in Carver, Minnesota. They moved to Deer Spring and later to New Meadow Run, Pennsylvania, where they lived in a Christian Community called "Bruderhof." They had five children: Dirk, 1959 (who died that same year); Johanna, 1960; Simeon, 1962; Maria, 1964; and Daniel, 1966.

In 1965 Hans decided to leave the Bruderhof and his family. He worked for several months in a greenhouse nearby and applied to Cornell University, where he was admitted in September 1966 as a botany student with a full scholarship, as he did not have his own resources. He obtained his bachelor and master's degrees at Cornell, but I don't remember the dates, as we had limited contact during this time.

In the summer of 1991, he visited for the first and last time the village of Klettendorf, now in Poland, where we lived up to 1945. After 46 years, he came back, this time as a tourist, with his son Simeon and me, his brother, visiting a foreign country, with foreign people living in the area and in his parent's farmhouse, speaking a language unknown to him.

The welcome was not openhearted. When he finally was admitted by an unfriendly elderly couple to our former home, he discovered parts of our family's former belongings, furniture, the stove, his own room; there were again tears in his eyes as 46 years before when he had to leave this place, but this time because everything was so run down and not well looked after.

He discovered his former primary school building, now a pub, and was allowed to have a look inside. He rolled his eyes when he came back, not saying a word.

He was reconciled, however, by the beauty of the landscape, opening the gate to hundreds of good memories linked to our childhood.

Did Hans' traumatic experience as a young boy have any impact on his life? Yes, I think so, and this in many ways. To lose a father, a home, and economic stability at his age may lead to a number of Freudian deficits: one loses a center of orientation, stability, confidence, and continuity and may become a migrant, uprooted, permanently looking for new harbors. In view of these experiences, one may not attach much importance to one's own personal economic situation. One does not trust too much in any political or private authority or hierarchy and especially in the advice given by the older generation. To some extent, this seems to apply to my brother.

On the other hand, he was permanently obliged and willing to adapt to new geographical, political, and cultural environments, to new horizons, in Europe, in North America, in Latin America, in Fiji. Thus he became a very open-minded person, eloquent, curious to learn and to understand, knowledgeable, tolerant, a decided pacifist and internationalist. In other words, he was a World Citizen; and, in fact, that is what he considered himself to be.